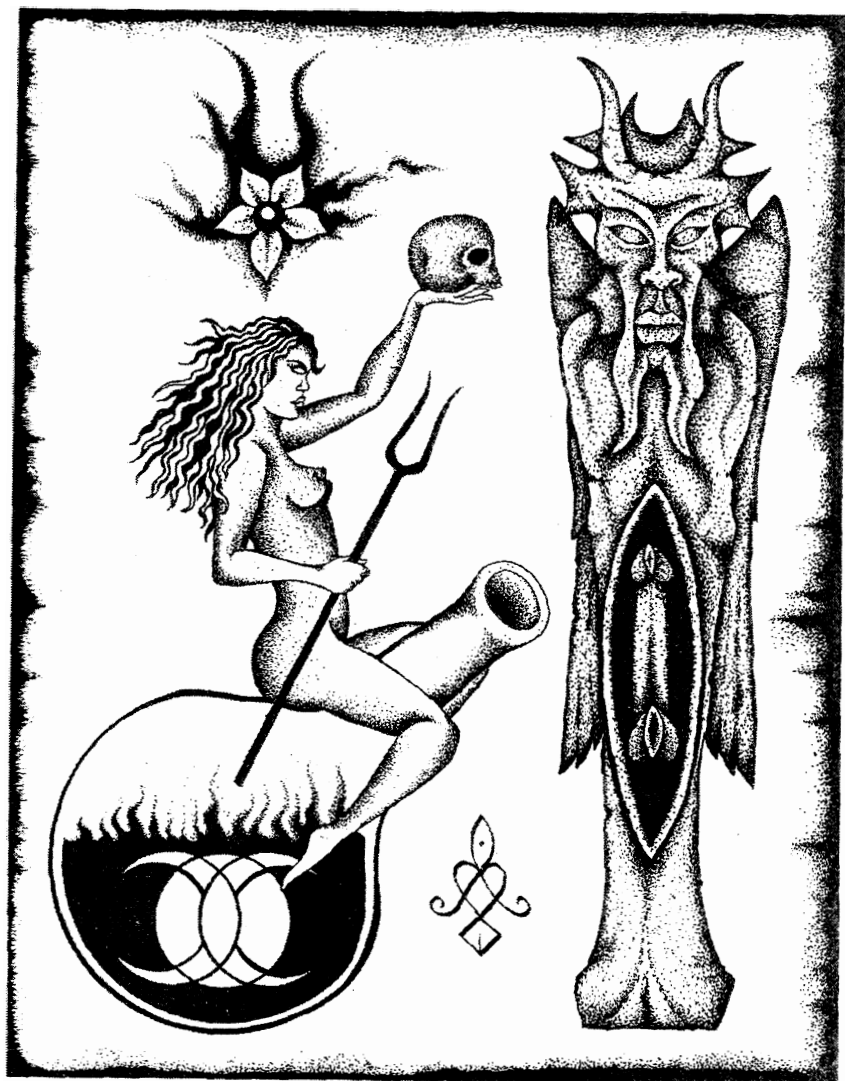


REWILDING WITCHCRAFT



by Peter Gray

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How tame we have become. How polite about our witchcraft. In our desire to harm none we have become harmless.

We have bargained to get a seat at the table of the great faiths to whom we remain anathema. How much compromise have we made in our private practice for the “mighty” freedom of being able to wear pewter pentagrams in public, at school, in our places of employment? How much have the elders sold us out, genuflecting to the academy, the establishment, the tabloid press? In return for this bargain we have gained precisely nothing. The supposed freedoms we have been granted are empty. Late capitalist culture simply does not care what our fantasy dress-up life is like as long as we work our zero hour contracts, carry our mobile phones and keep consuming. The reason that social services are not taking your children away is that nobody believes in the existence of the witch. We have mistaken social and economic change for the result of our own advocacy. Marching in lock-step with what used to be called mainstream, but is now mono-culture, we have disenchanted ourselves, handed over our teeth and claws and bristling luxuriant furs. I will not be part of this process, because to do so is to be complicit with the very forces that are destroying all life on earth. It is time for Witchcraft not to choose, but to remember which side it is on in this struggle.

Witch Becomes Wolf

I will argue that Witchcraft is quintessentially wild, ambivalent, ambiguous, queer. It is not something that can be socialized, standing as it does in that liminal space between the seen and unseen worlds. Spatially the realm of witchcraft is the hedge, the crossroads, the dreaming point where the world of men and of spirits parlay through the penetrated body of someone who is outside of the normal rules of culture. What makes this all the more vital is the way in which the landscape of witchcraft is changing. Ours is a practice grounded in the land, in the web of spirit relationships, in plant and insect and animal and bird. This is where we must orientate our actions, this is where our loyalty lies.

There is no halting the decline of the initiatic witchcraft traditions of Gardner or Sanders, nor the collapse of neo-paganism. The reason? To use the correct mimetic formula: Because Internet. People are having their needs met by the online simulacra of witchcraft. Those who are seeking witchcraft simply do not have to hunt out lineages, everything is before them in the digital form that has socialized them while their parents paid more attention to their smartphones. This new generation are drawn into increasingly ‘dark’ expressions of witchcraft as, following the logic of teenagers, it seems more authentic. It denies access to adults. In a sense they are correct to pursue taboo as a source of power; problematically they do not orientate their practice in

context and therefore remain trapped in their own ego projections rather than being engaged in meaningful work. Regardless, they outnumber you a thousand to one and they are trying to do something – we should applaud them for this at the very least. Another reflex of the death of Wicca is the rise of Traditional Craft. I take this to be a search for ritual practice which has retained its meaning following the collapse of the Murray thesis and the disenchantment caused by Hutton's *Triumph of the Moon* that whilst proposing a modern pagan witchcraft was, in retrospect, its death knell. But ultimately Traditional Witchcraft and Dark Fluff are a product of and a reaction to post-modernism; they are seeking something authentic in a culture devoid of values and meaning, though approaching it from opposite directions. Neither of these paths have an answer for what is happening. Tradition cannot help us because these circumstances have never occurred before; dark fluff cannot help us because it only seeks to exploit the symptoms of the crisis in the sphere of the individual; its endless promises of power are empty.

My argument is that witchcraft became too tame, that the responses to this have been too inward-looking and that the new witchcraft will need to take account of what is being done to the Wild. I am stating that this is happening, and I will name the forbidden forces that make it inevitable regardless of your personal loyalties or histories of practice. It is these forces which are the subject of my talk today, and in presenting them I will ask you to draw your own conclusions. For some of you I may seem too radical, but I am not proposing to tell you what to do, simply the fate of the heath upon which you must choose how to make your witchcraft congruent and effective.

To understand rewilding, half of the title of this talk, we begin with wolves. Not the last ones in England, extirpated in 1700 about the same time as the last witches were hung, but in Yellowstone National Park in 1994. Here the reintroduction of wolves created a seeming ecological miracle, a trophic cascade which changed the flow of rivers, brought back a diversity of plants and birds and animals. How did this happen? How did an eco-system in crisis undergo such a dramatic volte-face? When wolves were returned to the environment the deer were forced to change their habits as were coyotes, avoiding the blind traps of the river valleys whose plants, trees and shrubs burgeoned and provided further environments for birds, voles, foxes, beavers. The apex predator was shown to be the vital element in biodiversity. Man is the only exception to this rule.

Seven years ago I would have passionately held that this was a model for Witchcraft. I felt that the collapse of industrial civilization was our most likely outcome due to peak oil, the bell curve of high purity crude proposed by the geologist M. King Hubbert. This showed that the oil production which fueled the age of plenty which we have lived through had peaked in 1970. The cost

of extraction for tar sands, fracking and deep-water drilling are desperation and unable to balance the demands for infinite economic growth.

For those of you new to this idea I recommend John Michael Greer's *The Blood of the Earth* as he is both a Druid and a leading thinker in the peak oil movement. But we do not simply have peak oil, we have peak water, peak wood, peak rare earths, peak everything that is drawn into the maw of the inexorable algorithm of industrial culture and the inevitable wars and revolutions that resource scarcity produces.

Peak Oil Forecast

I once reasoned that, in a long slow decline of living standards, witchcraft as a low tech, local response could perhaps survive the coming storm and that, hand in hand with rewilding habitats as re-enchanted sacred spaces, it offered the potential for a post-industrial recovery of bio-diversity. Examples such as Yellowstone, and in particular Chernobyl, showed how seemingly impossible recoveries could occur. Rewilding offered the possibility to heal the land and with it ourselves – that is, those of us who made it through the choke point when the oil based economy failed to feed us all. If I want to be mischievous, I would have extended the metaphor, suggesting that by reintroducing the practitioners, the wolves, we would have kept down the population of neo-pagan apologists, the deer, and in doing so gained a thriving diversity.

Now everything has changed. We have a different ordeal that we need to undergo.

Rewilding is alas the final position of an ecological movement facing catastrophic losses. It is a beautiful thing to see a living system revived in a cascade of life and more life. It has given those in the often harrowing world of the ecological movement a glimpse of what can occur in a system that is enabled to right itself. Nature is beautiful in her abundance, and indeed what many neo-pagans mean when they say Goddess. Yet the essential failure of rewilding is this: we cannot simply introduce new predators, or species such as bison or beavers, into small isolated environments whilst industrial culture is destroying the entire matrix of life on the planet. These sanctuaries will inevitably be deregulated by government, hand in glove with industry, and overrun. I fully endorse the rewilding movement. For those in environmentalism we should give our absolute support; though I believe that their project is doomed it does not mean that we should not commit to these principles. I am not suggesting quitting. Far from it. These small victories will make a difference as we approach the choke point and particularly for those who have or choose, in spite of the facts, to have children. Witchcraft, being animist, is not so selfishly anthropocentric; our personal loyalty lies

not with our genetic survival but aligns with the fate of all things to which we are innately bound.

So we come to the heart of the issue: There is no wilderness left. No landscape that has not been despoiled by man. No living system that can escape the fate which our actions have bound it to. We are living in the age of absolute ecological collapse. Habitat loss is occurring at a staggering rate, driven by what industrial civilization has in common with the religions of the Book: the view that nature, like woman, is ours to dominate. Witchcraft has a more nuanced understanding of our place in the holarchy.

So what does our world look like?

Let me describe to you our power animals.

Wolf carcasses bored through with rifle point. Wet piles of Golden Eagles and Buzzards fed poisoned meat. Sharks long-lined and finned by fishing fleets that have butchered through the Tuna shoals we have fed to our plague of familiar cats. Barn Owls bleeding from their eyes and hæmorrhaging their guts down ghost white plumage due to the warfarin in rat poison. Toads and amphibian life mutating into monstrous pained death, whose gelatinous bones do not float back up the river.

The Extinction Symbol

We are living in a mass extinction event. This is not a theory. Over half the species on earth will be extinct by 2050. Let me repeat that fact: over half the species on earth will be extinct by 2050. We are on track to kill off 75% of life in no longer than 300 years, assuming we make it that far. This is the fastest and largest extinction event in history, including that of the dinosaurs. If we understand the example of the wolves, we can see that these are not discrete losses, they represent the unravelling of the entire warp and weft of life. In *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* by Elizabeth Kolbert, she reports the extinction rate in the tropics is now 10,000 times the background rate. If your witchcraft, like mine, speaks with animal spirits, is made from plants and flowers and roots and bark and seeds, it cannot continue to pretend that we are not suffering. It has to speak. It has to lament, it has to cry, it has to then be unreasonable. We need to be intimately acquainted with death, as these are the rites over which our witchcraft presides, not some nudist holiday camp capers predicated on a glut of cheap oil.

Witchcraft is embedded in the landscape, and our witchcraft must recognize that even the landscape of dream is emanated from the physical world, the body of the witch. So when we call our quarters these are what we must include if we wish to honor them:

Seawater so acidic that the shells of mollusks are dissolving. Oceans overfished to the extent that they resemble deserts, sea beds ploughed to destruction, micro-particles of indigestible plastic poisoning bird life and turtles, reefs bleached, plankton populations which are the building blocks of all ocean life disappearing. Ocean acidification is predicted to double by 2050. Ocean acidification triples by 2100. The death of the seas is inevitable. Of freshwater I will say that the draining of aquifers is ongoing, that fracking threatens the water table and that wars over water are going to rage in the coming years.

Water, I bid you hail and welcome.

The Earth itself is exhausted, soil degradation endemic, washed with its nitrogen fertilizers into our already poisoned seas. The living Earth is fragile, it takes a hundred years to form a centimeter of topsoil. Farmland is a limited resource and eroding fast. Industrial pollution has destroyed 20% of the farmland in China – I am not sure that you, or I, can grasp quite how much land that is. Globally 38% of farmland is now classified as degraded. Human population continues to grow, as our ability to feed it, and our infrastructures, buckle. Insect populations will soon not be able to pollinate the crops. It is not just the bees, with climate change animals and insects are being born out of sync with their food sources. As I have said before, the wheel of the year has been broken.

Earth, I bid you hail and welcome.

The air and fire are perhaps what should give us most concern. We thought we had more time. That man-made climate change would be tackled. It has not, and it will not be, as Government and Corporate interests are one and the same, namely infinite growth. This is where you should feel the knot of fear in your stomach. The CO2 emissions that are wreaking havoc now are the result of what we burned forty years ago. Since then we have engaged in an orgy of denial and consumption. There is no tech-fix in the Anthropocene, the age of manmade climate change. Nothing has been done.

What mainstream scientists are not telling you is that the impact we are having is creating self-reinforcing feedback loops. Essentially they focus on a single domino when we have an entire array triggered and falling. Methane release from thawing Arctic Tundra is particularly worrying. We are facing NTE: Near Term Extinction. The reason you don't know all of this is explained in the following quote from Guy McPherson:

Mainstream scientists minimize the message at every turn. As we've known for years, scientists almost invariably underplay climate impacts. And in some cases, scientists are aggressively muzzled by

their governments. I'm not implying conspiracy among scientists. Science selects for conservatism. Academia selects for extreme conservatism. These folks are loathe to risk drawing undue attention to themselves by pointing out there might be a threat to civilization. Never mind the near-term threat to our entire species (they couldn't care less about other species).

You probably know that the current official approach of the IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change) is to limit us to a 2 degrees temperature rise. Well, the Hadley Centre for Meteorological Research (2009) predicts: +4°C by 2060 and the United Nations Environment Programme (2010) up to: +5°C by 2050. Clearly we are being lied to. Clearly something is **very** wrong.

Air and Fire, I bid you hail and welcome.

Estimates for the time that this process will take, the process of extinction, range from fifty to three hundred years. What those figures do not tell you is the turmoil and suffering that occurs during the collapse of our living systems. They also do not tell you that with the collapse of civilization our nuclear reactors go critical and render no life possible on this planet for 100 million years. There is no magic that can fix this; witchcraft, as I have written, flies on the wings of the storm, it cannot change the physical elements we have locked into our climate system. Witchcraft must gaze fixedly at this future. Witchcraft must be the first movement to be brave enough to accept the Anthropocene and to make our last stand. Even if we ended industrial civilization today we would not be able to prevent these outcomes, but still we are compelled to act.

Some will be afraid of this knowledge; witchcraft should be liberated by it, liberated from petty concerns to pursue lives of beauty, liberated from the sleepwalking into death that our culture has made for us and our children. So I counsel, confront death. For witchcraft to be anything other than the empty escapism of the socially dysfunctional or nostalgia for bygone ages, it needs to feel the shape of its skull, venerate the dead and the sacred art of living and dying with meaning. We are all on the fierce path now.

Confront death, not by pretending that you have cut a deal with the Elder Vampire Gods invented for you by some internet Dark Witch fantasist in their over-priced books. Confront death, not by pretending that a beautiful Beltane ritual and a blue sky means everything will stay the same. Confront death, not by practicing the magic of ploughmen and *wort-cunners* in your urban apartment believing that it makes you more authentic than any given Wiccan. We need to stop making those closest to us our sworn enemies. The game has changed. I have no interest in telling people how to practice their witchcraft, a term which covers a multitude of sins, but what I can offer is the principles that will make it work in these difficult circumstances. Readers of

my *Apocalyptic Witchcraft* will recognize these ideas: Orientation, Presence, Imperative. We are not simply losing it all, it is being stripped from us as surely as those accused of being witches were by their inquisitors in the torture cell. Our enemies are not our sisters and brothers in the craft, they are the named individuals and corporations and their governments who are tearing out our living flesh. Witchcraft has never been about turning the other cheek to this. The witch has been created by the land to speak and act for it.

Pile of Human Skulls

If you prefer reassurances you can ask the New Agers about their ‘global awakening product’ or believe the green wash of the venture capitalists who will seek to cash-in on the death of the biosphere with equally implausible schemes and vaporware tech-fixes. The governments and scientists will continue to lie to you to prevent the panic that disrupts shopping as usual; however, the cracks in the official narrative are beginning to show. Most will choose to keep mainlining what Dmitri Orlov calls *hopium* from the sock puppets squawking out of the idiot box. However, I predict the next generation are going to be angrier and their witchcraft more radical than you or I could dream. They will realize that there is nothing to lose, rather than this generation which seems concerned only about the size of their pension pots – not the fact that they have cost us all the earth.

We need to offer the death rites in a culture that pretends that death can be cheated by buying the latest i-gadget or hooking ourselves up to plasma bags of young blood. These technological and scientific responses do not account for the wider environment which we do not control, but which now seeks to redress the killing balance and is doing so with storm surge and wildfire and tornado and flood and drought regardless of what is playing on your headphones or how high the gates are to your compound. I welcome this storm.

I had spoken to a friend about a time when a spirit came through to us and just wept. He wanted to know if the spirit world was aware and reacting to all this. To us they are. Our allies in the wild are making their last stand and we stand with them. We are embedded in this other world and it will speak through us.

Extinction is a difficult realization. After you have worked through the denial, you are going to need to cry in order that you can offer up the sacred lament. The five steps of the grieving process are well known, delineated by psychiatrist Kübler-Ross; they are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance. Everyone here will be somewhere on this scale and it is important for you to understand this process as you come to terms with these facts.

The Meaning of Witchcraft

American environmentalists now talk about us being in hospice, that is, transitioning to death in a calm supportive place. Witchcraft is more active than that; we are performing rites for those in need, those who are freeing themselves from the social blindfold. If you are engaged in witchcraft I suggest that you work on the lament, on your death rites, your eschatology and on your spirit body. There are the examples to emulate of those sensitively lifting roadkill from the asphalt for burial or reanimation, tending the graves of their neglected local cemetery, lighting candles for their ancestors, remembering the lost children. We should also be able to offer ministry to those who are being broken on the wheel of modern life and for whom self-harm and SSRIs cannot numb the pain. Our relationship to the living world of spirit means that we should also offer our support to those who are actively seeking to destroy industrial civilization by direct action against its infrastructure. These people are not terrorists, they are the conscience of the body of the world. We must defend what is left. As practitioners we must also begin to transfer our allegiance to the other world, for if there is to be any survival that is where it can be found. This does not mean that we abscond from our responsibilities in the world as it is.

With climate collapse and infrastructure failure in what now seems not a slow but a jagged descent, a shift to the local and a disengagement from power structures are necessary steps. *Find the others* has become an imperative. Our personal eschatology, the inevitability of our physical deaths, is now being played out on a planetary scale. Form your covens, your working groups, for there is no time to lose. Make your ritual actions count. Be present in every action and exchange. Love one another.

Witchcraft has never been passive in the face of power. Our witchcraft will not be silenced at a time such as this, it will not be polite. Witchcraft cannot retreat to the wilderness, because there is no exterior wilderness left; instead we need to exteriorize our inner wild. We need to wake up the animal in our bodies. This is witchcraft as contagion, as living flame. We witches must however reluctantly return the curse that has been laid upon us all.

Manifesto of Apocalyptic Witchcraft

Our elders have failed us, they have not provided leadership, they have not provided counsel, they have been silent and compliant in the face of power. They have said nothing on fracking, climate collapse, the extinction crisis and done even less. The old have, for the most part, betrayed the young. This is as true of witchcraft as it is of our wider culture. It is therefore down to us as individuals to take our lead from the only source of initiation, living spirit,

and through it embody the new witchcraft. We must become a witchcraft with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, of responsibility to the land which is in crisis, or we are nothing more than consumers of the earth which will all too soon eat of us.

Those who do not feel the imperative to act on this information demonstrate that they are not orientated, that is, they have no connection to the land and its denizens. Their magic is little more than a cerebral construct, and without being embodied is meaningless. Witchcraft is profoundly animist, and that means we have responsibilities to fulfill. There is no hierarchy of actions, no purity test as to how practitioners use this knowledge; each will find their own innate response that is generated from their own circumstances and the needs of their community of spirits.

But to conclude, I have an answer of a kind. We are an ecstatic cult and our ritual of ecstasy is the Sabbat. All flesh is one flesh in the Sabbat. We are these species. We are partaking of this beautiful erotic dance of unbecoming and yes, horror. Take off your clothes witchcraft, your human faces and find your skins. Devour the intimacy of your other bodies, welcome them into you as they possess you. Our wine is to be found in this bloody cup, pressed out of our own beating hearts in stamping steps. Here is the rose, dance here.

—This talk was given at the Pagan Federation South Central conference on Saturday 7th June, 2014. It has been published online for the Full Moon of Friday 13th June and will be subsequently included in The Brazen Vessel, the collected essays of Peter Grey and Alkistis Dimech, by Scarlet Imprint.

It's no longer fringe "speculation" that an orgy of incomparable devastation has seized modern humans or that civilization bears the traits of an unbridled homicidal mania and the fullness of the earth withers from its poisonous breath. The consuming fire of civilization is spreading out in an unbridled, raving way, strangling and swallowing into nothingness the living web of species and relationships. The further this overshadowing *disenchantment* advances, the clearer the signs of breakdown and mass annihilation become. We've all heard what the liberals, progressives, Greens, career activists, protestors and environmental specialists have to say about civilization's mad momentum ...and it isn't much. So perhaps it's time to consider the voices of genuine outsiders inhabiting the thin line between the diminishing wild and a civilization devouring itself: **Witches**.

Born in the torture chambers of the Inquisition, Witchcraft has long been a current of resistance to civilization, a civilization that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Within this bleak pamphlet Peter Grey (author of *Apocalyptic Witchcraft*) paints a drastic picture of witchcraft's last stand, in this, the twilight of an age.

ENEMY COMBATANT PUBLICATIONS



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